

Does the God of the Bible Have Surprises?

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Over the past twenty or thirty years there has been a lively debate about the omniscience of God.¹ The debate has been largely carried on by philosophers and theologians, though they have also sought to pay serious attention to scripture.² In this paper I come at the question as an exegete, albeit one who has been described as a theologian who only presents himself as an exegete and doesn't mind that description, in order to look at the material in scripture that relates to the nature and extent of God's knowledge. My suspicion has been that the biblical material partly supports and also partly contrasts with both "open theism" and "classical theism," but also that in the way it does so it suggests a different framework for considering the question. Convictions and questions that we bring to scripture commonly both enable us to see things there that we might otherwise miss, but also need to have their own perspective reframed, and that is true about classical theism and open theism, as of other things that end in "-ism" (Calvinism, Arminianism, evangelicalism, fundamentalism, feminism, postcolonialism, pietism, pacifism...). These -isms overlap with scripture but they combine scripture with traditions or thinking from elsewhere. Classical theism then involves scripture by pointing to texts that might seem to support the theological convictions it affirms. Open theism likewise looks for "biblical support" for the perspective that it advocates on the basis of different theological convictions.³ But both sets of convictions emerge from cultures (one more ancient Greek, one more postmodern). My own study will also reflect who I am, a renegade English Episcopalian

¹ It is in large part a revisiting of the older debate about predestination and freewill, or a subset of that debate, and many people on one side of the debate do not mind being called Calvinists, while many on the other side do not mind being called Arminians. Much of the practical energy of the debate issues from a concern that belief in God's sovereignty and omniscience is hard to reconcile with belief in human freedom and responsibility. See, e.g., Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1988), p. xiii; Steven C. Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow?* (Downers Grove, IL/Nottingham, UK: IVP, 2006), p. 13. The question then is how we can hold onto both beliefs or whether we need to qualify one of them.

² For instance, Richard Rice, the originator of the debate on "open theism" in his book *The Openness of God* (Nashville: Review and Herald, 1980) and also the author of the chapter "Biblical Support for a New Perspective" in Clark Pinnock and others, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), pp. 11-58, is a professor of theology and philosophy of religion. Steven Roy, the author of *How Much Does God Foreknow?* is a professor of pastoral theology. But Terence Fretheim, who writes on divine foreknowledge in *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 45-59, is an Old Testament professor.

³ See the title of the chapter by Richard Rice just noted.

professor of Old Testament. But that may enable me to see some other things.

1 God's Knowledge of the Future

In the debate about the extent of God's knowledge, the major difference concerns God's knowledge of the future. Classical and open theists agree that God knows everything. Their disagreement concerns the extent of this "everything." Classical theism affirms that it embraces past, present, and future. Augustine, an ancient classical theist, declares, "one who is not foreknowing of all future things is certainly not God."⁴ Omniscience is part of the definition of the word "God." On the other hand, open theism notes that the future does not exist and therefore logically cannot be known; the "everything" that exists and that God knows is confined to past and present. John Sanders, a modern open theist declares, "God knows all the past and present but there is no exhaustively definite future for God to know."⁵

While I want to try to look at the way scripture talks about God's knowledge without letting that way of setting up the question determine the way scripture has to provide its answers, I begin with the question whether God knows everything about the future, because of this disagreement.

When God knows how things will turn out

God often does know ahead of time things that are going to happen. One reason for this is that God has decided that they will happen; and when God decides things, they come about. In Genesis 41, an Egyptian king has a dream about fat cows and thin cows, and Joseph tells him what it means, and he prefaces this explanation by declaring that "God has announced to Pharaoh what he is doing" (Gen 41:25; cf. 28). Joseph's words concern not merely what God foresees. God intends to bring about seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. "The matter has been fixed by God, and God is ready to do it" (Gen 41:32). God can speak of such events in the future because God has decided to make them happen.

The book called Isaiah emphasizes this perspective more systematically than any other book in the Bible. Near its beginning, Isaiah declares that many nations are going to come to Jerusalem and that God will sort out their conflicts so that they can enjoy a huge peace dividend (Isa 2:2-4). More solemnly, God declares that before then, Assyria, the superpower of the day, is going to invade Judah and attack Jerusalem (e.g., Isa 5:26-30). God is going to make these things happen. Later in the book, being able to declare what is going to happen and then make it happen is one of the reasons why people

⁴ Augustine, *City of God* 5.9.

⁵ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), p. 129.

should recognize that Yahweh alone is God. Assyria is put down by Babylon, and Babylon is put down by Persia to make it possible for Judean exiles in Babylon to go home. Who made that happen? Yahweh made it happen. And the evidence of this is that Yahweh had said it was going to happen. Yahweh or Yahweh's prophets are not like someone telling you *after* 9/11 what it meant and why it happened. Yahweh tells people *before* things happen, and is then in a position afterwards to say "You see? I said it would happen, and it has happened. Now will you acknowledge that the Babylonian gods are not worth paying attention to?" (Isa 41:21-29). In the New Testament, Peter similarly argues that Jesus' betrayal happened "by the fixed plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). In this connection, it is inappropriate to think of God *predicting* things; you do not predict things if you are the person who makes them happen. At the beginning of a class, if a student tells a visitor, "He will lecture for thirty minutes and then we will have twenty minutes' discussion," this is a prediction. But if the professor says, "I will lecture for thirty minutes and then we will have twenty minutes' discussion," this is not a prediction but a declaration of intent.

On the other hand, there are other events that God knows about ahead of time without being the one who makes them happen, at least not on that direct and purposeful way presupposed by Genesis and Isaiah. God knows that Abraham's descendants will live as serfs in a foreign country and will be ill-treated for four hundred years (Gen 15:13). God's aide is able to say what kind of person Ishmael will turn out to be (Gen 16:12). God knows Pharaoh will not let Israel go unless he is forced to (Exod 3:19). Sometimes it is not clear whether God knows something because of having supernatural knowledge or whether God is declaring an intent; this is the case when God declares the consequences that will follow from Adam and Eve's disobedience and from Cain's fratricide, and declares how Esau and Jacob's personalities will emerge (e.g., Gen 3:14-19; 4:10-15; 25:23). In the New Testament, NRSV sees the readers of 1 Peter 1:2 as "chosen and destined by God... to be obedient to Jesus Christ," but TNIV describes them more literally as "chosen according to the foreknowledge of God," which could imply that God chose on the basis of foreknowing their own decision. On other occasions God may know what is going to happen because it is possible to infer it from facts about the present, especially for one who is very knowledgeable about the present.

Now God is not timeless in the sense of outside time,⁶ but God is involved in all time. God is omni-temporal. Might that be why God can know the future, because all time is simultaneously present to God? This would be a rather paradoxical concept, though it might be

⁶ But Paul Helm defends this traditional view in *Eternal God*, whose subtitle is "A Study of God without Time."

none the worse for that. Yet being involved in all time need not imply that all time is simultaneously present to God. I have been involved in and present to the whole of the last sixty-six years, but not all at once. Scripture's narrative account of God would suggest that God's involvement in all time is a linear one. There is a "before" and "after" for God. For God, there is such a thing as remembering and anticipating. But that does open up the possibility for God of moving from present to past and future, as in a limited way human beings can. And thus God can make it possible for a prophet to see something and speak of it as past when it is still future.

Further, God is not the only person who can know things about the future, and prophets who speak in Yahweh's name are not the only human beings who do so. While scripture sometimes portrays diviners, astrologists, and "false prophets" as charlatans, it sometimes assumes that such people do have true knowledge about the future.⁷ In the New Testament, prophets such as Agabus can announce things about the future (Acts 11:28); the New Testament sees prophecy as a gift that would be exercised in the church, and Christian history has seen much exercise of that gift. One of the stories about Agabus also indicates the assumption that knowing about the future makes it possible to change it (Acts 21:10-12), which is also a presupposition of divination and astrology.

And if human beings can sometimes know the future without all time being present to them, we can perhaps surrender to Ockham's razor the problematic idea of all time being simultaneously present to God

When God does not know how things will turn out

So there are many occasions when God knows about what is to happen in the future, either on the basis of being the one who decides it, or by supernatural insight, or by inference from the present. But there are other occasions when this is not so. For instance, there are occasions when God has not yet decided what to do. When the people make the golden calf at Sinai, God says, "remove your finery and I will know what I shall do with you" (Exod 33:5). In light of this comment, God's exasperated question, "What am I to do with you, Ephraim?" (Hos 6:4) may not be purely rhetorical. God's decision-making takes place in time.

There are other aspects of the future that God does not know. I begin from the fact that God sometimes uses the word "perhaps." God sends Jeremiah to address the worshipers in the temple.

⁷ Deuteronomy 13 envisages a prophet or diviner wishing to get Israel to worship another god and announcing a sign that then does come about, though it probably implies that it is God who makes this false prophet able to do this. The serpent speaks more accurately than God of the consequences that will follow from eating the fruit of the knowledge tree (Gen 3:5).

“Perhaps they will listen and turn, each one, from his wrong way, so that I may relent of the trouble that I am planning to cause to them” (Jer 26:3; cf. 36:3). God sends Ezekiel to dramatize before his people the exile that threatens those same worshipers, and comments, “Perhaps they will see” (Ezek 12:3). It is an open question whether this will happen, an open question for God as for anyone else. God has hopes that it might happen, but waits on events to discover whether it will be so. Not all the future is present to God.

This had been so from the beginning, as appears from passages that do not use the word “perhaps.” God brings the animals to Adam “to see what he would call them” (Gen 2:19).⁸ When God bids Moses lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses asks what to do if they will not listen. God gives Moses a sign to perform before them, then another sign, and adds “If they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they may believe the second,”⁹ and after this adds further that “if they do not believe even these two signs and pay heed to your voice,” Moses is to perform a third sign (Exod 4:1-9). God seems not to know at what point the people may come to believe.¹⁰

When things turn out differently from God’s expectations

Further, God experiences disappointment. It is possible to experience disappointment only if one hoped for something and had not foreseen that it would not happen. About the year 740, the prophet Isaiah became a singer-songwriter. “I am going to sing for my dear friend a love song about his vineyard,” he declared (Isa 5:1).¹¹ Isaiah was composing a song that his friend could sing for his girl, or that Isaiah could sing to her on his behalf. The song comes to an unexpected conclusion. The vinedresser expected the vineyard to produce good grapes, but it produced sour grapes. The song turns out to be more like a blues, a song about a love affair that did not work out, which is what singer-songwriters usually sing about. But Isaiah’s actual audience is his usual one, the people who gather in the temple courts in Jerusalem. In case they cannot work out the significance of his sad song, he spells it out. The vinedresser expected grapes would grow but they did not. The lover hoped love

⁸ It is perhaps implied that only in light of doing this does God decide to make Adam a dedicated partner (Gen 2:20-22).

⁹ Or “they *will* believe the second” (NJPS); but God’s adding a possible third sign suggests the matter is not fixed.

¹⁰ But Berel Dov Lerner, for whose critique of this paper I am grateful, suggests that this is a kind of *argumentum ad hominem*: God is trying to calm Moses down by saying, “If the first sign does not convince them, don’t worry, the second one will, or the third one will.”

¹¹ To us the notion of a love song about a vineyard would be odd, but this would not be the case for Isaiah’s friend; he would be familiar with the metaphor of vinedresser and vineyard as a way of speaking about a man and the woman he loved. The metaphor recurs in the Song of Songs (e.g., 1:6; 2:15; 7:8 [9]; 8:11-12).

would grow and it did not. God thought *mišpāt* and *sēdāqâ* would grow and they did not.¹² God, like some vinedressers and some lovers, had a surprise, and it was an unpleasant one, as was usually the case in God's experience.¹³ God had not foreseen the result of tending the vineyard.¹⁴

Isaiah's love song is not unique in implying that God had hopes that were disappointed. Jeremiah, too, speaks of Israel's attitude to God as surprising and disheartening. Israel had been unfaithful to God. "And I said [to myself],"¹⁵ God tells us, "after doing all these things, she will turn to me; but she did not turn" (Jer 3:6-7). Later, God puts it another way, recalling having resolved to adopt Israel as a member of the family, "and I said [to myself], you will call to me as 'my Father,' and in future you will not turn [away]";¹⁶ but actually Israel had been faithless, had turned away elsewhere (Jer 3:19-20).¹⁷ Isaiah 63:8-10 reports that "God said [to himself], 'They are indeed my people, children who will not play false.'... But those people rebelled and grieved his holy spirit." Things turn out differently from God's expectations.

When things turn out differently from God's announcements

Further, while scripture often states or assumes that events turn out as God declared they would, a number of accounts of God making such declarations are followed by accounts of how events did not turn out as God said. Micah's prophecy that Jerusalem would be destroyed (Mic 3:12) was not fulfilled, because the king submitted himself to God and begged mercy (Jer 26:17-19). God commissioned Jonah to proclaim that in forty days Nineveh would be destroyed, but

¹² We do not have words in English that correspond very well to *mišpāt* and *sēdāqâ*; translations use words such as "justice" and "righteousness," but these come rather short of giving the right impression. The words suggest something like "the faithful exercise of authority."

¹³ God gets few nice surprises, though that is partly because God is always hoping for the best of us; hope springs eternal in the divine breast.

¹⁴ In what sense had God "expected" Judah to be characterized by the faithful exercise of authority? Might God have expected it only in the sense of *requiring* it? So David Hunt, "A Simple-Foreknowledge Response," in James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (ed.), *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), pp. 48-54 (pp. 50-51). On the eve of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 Lord Nelson signaled to his fleet, "England expects that every man will do his duty." He could have meant that he *anticipates* that they will or that he is laying an *obligation* on them. But this ambiguity about the English word "expect" does not extend to the Hebrew verb *qāwâ* (piel). That verb means expect in the sense of "hope" (NJPS).

¹⁵ "I said to myself" is a common implication of the ordinary Hebrew verb "I said."

¹⁶ Again, this is a common implication of the ordinary word for "turn."

¹⁷ Zephaniah likewise underlines the depth of God's disappointed conviction about Jerusalem: "I said [to myself], 'She will definitely revere me, receive discipline.'... On the contrary, they could not wait to practice corruption in all their deeds" (Zeph 3:7). "They could not wait" translates the verb *šākam*, which etymologically suggests that they got up early in the morning to practice this corruption

it was not (Jonah 3:4, 10). In such situations, the declaration of intent presupposed an “unless” clause, “unless you repent”; the “unless” clause is elaborated in Jer 18:1-12. That is, God’s declarations of intent presuppose that people will carry on behaving as they are behaving at the moment, for good or ill. But if they do not, what God says will happen, will not happen.

A different form of “unless” clause is presupposed by the story of David’s escape from Keilah (1 Sam 23:7-13). David is being pursued by Saul. He asks God whether Saul will follow him to this town where he has taken refuge, and whether its people will surrender him to Saul. God says the answer to both questions is “Yes”: Saul will follow him and the people will surrender him. So David flees; and neither declaration comes true. God’s statements about the future can be dependent on certain assumptions, but it is open to the people involved to change the suppositions.

God said Nebuchadnezzar would capture Tyre but later refers to the fact that Nebuchadnezzar did not, and God therefore promised him Egypt instead (Ezek 26:1-21; 29:17-20). Here in yet another way, human responses have caused God’s declaration not to come true; God notes that Tyre resisted Nebuchadnezzar too hard. Now presumably God could have made it possible to overwhelm Tyre’s resistance, as happened when God deprived Sennacherib of the satisfaction of taking Jerusalem (1 Kings 19). But God did not do so. The Old Testament makes no further comment on this phenomenon, and seems untroubled by it. We might compare other stories of God being overcome by human strength. When Moses is on his way back to Egypt, “God met him and sought to kill him.” But God did not succeed. Zipporah took action, circumcising her son, “and God let him [Moses] alone” (Exod 4:24-26). God sought to kill Moses, but Moses and/or Zipporah would not cooperate. The story recalls an earlier occasion when someone wrestled all night with Jacob and in the morning declared, “You have striven with God and with humanity and won.” Jacob’s naming of the place “Peniel” suggests the conviction that “I saw God face to face and my life was preserved” (Gen 32:25-31).

God had said that on the day Adam ate of the knowledge tree, he would definitely die (Gen 2:17); he did not do so, though on that day he did lose the possibility of immortality. There is no indication of a change of heart on Adam’s part that leads God to have a change of heart. There are other accounts of God having a change of heart or relenting (*nāhām* niphal) because of considerations that come from inside God rather than as a result of human response to God’s word (e.g., Exod 32:11-14; Num 14:13-20; Amos 7:1-6). God can make a decision on the basis of the need to punish wrongdoing, but then change it on the basis of the need to be merciful.

When things turn out differently from God's announcements, this does not mean God is fallible. There are implicit if not explicit conditions attached both to declarations of intent and to declarations of what must follow as an outworking of the present. God's declarations imply "unless I find reason to change my mind" or "unless circumstances change or people change." In either case, God having a change of mind will happen only within the context of consistency and commitment to achieving the goals that God had determined.

Similar considerations apply to occasions when things turn out differently from Jesus' announcements.¹⁸ Jesus said that some people standing in his presence would not taste death until they saw God's reign come with power (Mark 9:1). While his transfiguration, his death, his resurrection, the giving of the Spirit, the spread of the gospel, and the fall of Jerusalem all count in different ways as such a coming of God's reign with power, none has the finality of consummation that his words suggest. His prophecy in Mark 13 likewise gives the impression that all the events he speaks of will come in the lifetime of the disciples to whom he is speaking. In some words that appear only in the Matthean version of part of his prophecy (Matt 9:23), he promises the disciples that when they flee from persecution, they will not have exhausted all possible refuges "before the Son of Man comes." Even though he emphasizes that only God knows the day or hour when everything will be fulfilled (Mark 13:32-33), he does imply that this will come in the disciples' lifetime; it is they who need to be alert. He does not give the impression that he expects or that God intends world history to go on roughly as it always has for two more millennia. How things work out would need to interact with the way the disciples and/or the Jewish community and/or the Romans acted. This is then confirmed by the extraordinary statement in 2 Peter 3:12 that it is possible for the readers of the letter to "hasten the coming of the day of God."¹⁹

To summarize so far, then, God sometimes knows how things will turn out on the basis of making the decisions about them, or because of possessing in spades the kind of great insight a human being can possess in extrapolating into the future. Open theism stresses both these aspects of God's capacity to know the future.²⁰ But attempting to explain all examples of foreknowledge in these ways seems to be forced. It is a theory driven by the philosophical conviction of open theism that by its nature the future cannot be known until it happens. As scripture sees it, God sometimes knows

¹⁸ I am grateful to Bruce Fisk for suggesting I think about these parallels.

¹⁹ The verb is *speudō*, whose regular meaning is "hasten," though it can mean "be zealous for" (cf. NRSV and TNIV margins).

²⁰ See Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," p. 51.

how things will turn out, simply on the basis of some supernatural capacity to do so. How human beings or God can know the future when it has not happened, I do not know, but there is too strong scriptural testimony to this for it to be appropriate to try to explain away the idea.

On the other hand, sometimes God does not know how the future will turn out, and God sometimes has expectations about the future that are not fulfilled. God has surprises. Neither God nor the scriptures reckon that this has troublesome implications. Here, it is classical theism that seeks to explain away scripture's statements. But here, too, there is too strong scriptural testimony concerning this for it to be appropriate to try to explain it away. God does not know everything about the future.

2 God's Knowledge of the Present and the Past

God also has extraordinary, supernatural knowledge of the present and the past; God knows things about present and past that ordinary human knowledge would not cover. God knows that when King Abimelech added Sarah to his harem, the king was not aware that she was married, so that in this sense he had acted with integrity of heart (Gen 20:5). God knows Israel will turn to other gods after arriving in Canaan, "because I know their plan that they are making today, before I bring them into the land" (Deut 31:20-21); God's capacity to extrapolate what Israel will do in the future issues from God's present knowledge of what is in Israel's heart.

Innate and Empirical Knowledge

How does God possess such knowledge? How do human beings possess knowledge? There is a longstanding philosophical argument concerning whether we are born with no knowledge, so that all our knowledge is empirically derived, or whether we are hard-wired with some knowledge in areas such as mathematics, logic, morality, and God. It would suit me to presuppose that humanity's knowledge indeed involves both hardwiring and discovery, because I could then suggest that in this respect as in others the scriptures presupposes that we are made in God's image, though my colleague in philosophical theology and theology of science Nancey Murphy warns me not to do so. Whether or not this is true of human beings, scripture does imply that God is hardwired with some knowledge but gains other knowledge empirically.

Amusingly, the first witness to God's having innate knowledge is the snake, who knows that God knows that eating from the knowledge tree will lead to discernment of the difference between good and bad (Gen 3:5). I take it that God's self-description in Exod 34:6-7 in terms

of being compassionate, gracious, and so on, reflects innate knowledge of what it means to be God.

But scripture makes clear that God's knowledge is empirical as well as innate. "God – from heaven he has looked down at human beings to see if there is someone discerning, someone having recourse to God" (Ps 14:1 [2]). To discover things about the present, God looks, God discovers things empirically. Human hearts lie open before God (Prov 15:11): that is, God does not automatically know what is in them, but can look in and discover what is there. It is on the basis of being able to see the mind and heart that God tests the faithful (Jer 20:12).

In the New Testament, Hebrews 4:13 notes how no one can hide from God; "all are naked and bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render account." Other passages similarly affirm God's capacity to look into people's minds: "God searches every mind and understands every plan and thought" (1 Chron 28:9). The fact that God "knows the secrets of the heart" is linked to the fact that God "searches out" what people do (Ps 44:21 [22]). God has the capacity to find things out. "'If a person hides in a hiding place, can I myself not see him?'" (Jer 23:24). You can run but you cannot hide (cf. Job 34:21-22).

God acts to discover things about the past as well as about the present. After Abraham and Sarah serve a meal to three mysterious visitors and two of them have set off for Sodom and Gomorrah, God says, "I will go down to see: have they acted entirely in accordance with the outcry about it that comes to me? If not, I will know [it]" (Gen 18:21).²¹ God knows about the past as about the present on the basis of empirical investigation as well as innate knowledge; God can discover anything in this way.

A further indication that God gains knowledge empirically is that God asks questions. Admittedly some of God's questions may be taken as rhetorical and thus as not indicating that God lacks knowledge on a matter.²² When God confronts Adam and Eve and

²¹ God's form of speech is very similar to the words Abraham's servant uses when he is wondering if he has found the right wife for Isaac, and to the words Moses uses when he is wondering if his birth family are still alive (Gen 24:21; Exod 4:18).

²² As their use by the prophets show, rhetorical questions are a means of communication that involves the audience, who have to provide the obvious reply (which the speaker knows) and/or because – paradoxically – formulating the statements as questions strengthens the assertions they imply. In passages such as Jer 2:31-32; 5:7, 9, 29; 23:23-24, God knows the answer, and the question can be turned into a statement without changing the content of the words. In passages such as Jer 4:14; 8:5, the question is a protest not a request for information that the questioner lacks, like the protests in the Psalms. There are other passages that might seem to indicate limitations on God's knowledge, but that do not seem to me to do so. Jer 19:5; 7:31; 32:35 speak of things that never came into God's mind, but this indicates that God did not think about requiring something, not that God was unaware that people might act in such a way.

Cain, some of God's questions might be taken as rhetorical (Gen 3:13; 4:6), some look literal (Gen 3:11).²³

Further, there are many occasions when God tests people, and the object of a test is to find out something one would not otherwise know.²⁴ God first tests (*nāśâ piel*) Abraham, by bidding him sacrifice his son. When Abraham has demonstrated his willingness to do so, God declares, "Now I know²⁵ that you revere God" (Gen 22:12).²⁶ After the exodus, God declares the intention to provide the manna "so that I may test them: will they walk by my teaching or not?" (Exod 16:4). Subsequently, if a prophet appears and urges Israel to follow another god, "God your God is testing you so as to know if you are committed²⁷ to loving Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul" (Deut 13:3 [4]).²⁸ God does not have innate knowledge of what is in people's hearts, but does have the capacity to get to know this, and sometimes uses that capacity, yet does not always do so. Like God's capacity to know the future, God's distinctive capacity to know what is in someone's heart is paralleled by occasional human capacity to have the same insight.

²³ Some could be understood either way (Gen 3:9; 4:9-10; the same applies in Gen 16:8).

²⁴ God can be engaged in such testing when the verb "test" does not appear, not least in Gen 2 - 3 and also in Job 1 - 2, but I focus here on passages that use the verb "test."

²⁵ Or "I have come to know" (the verb is *qatal*) or "I acknowledge."

²⁶ Roy's survey of alternative suggested but implausible approaches to this passage (*How Much Does God Foreknow?* pp. 177-82) gives eloquent testimony to its difficulty for the view that God has total knowledge.

²⁷ The verb is again *šākam*: see the comment on Zeph 3:7.

²⁸ A principle behind God's causing Israel to travel through the wilderness for forty years was "so as by afflicting you and testing you, to come to know what was in your heart: will you keep his commands or not?" (Deut 8:2; cf. v. 16). In the land, one reason for God's not expelling the former inhabitants of Canaan is "so as to test Israel by means of them: are they keeping the way of God... or not?" (Judg 2:22; cf. 3:1). For God, these peoples thus "became a means of testing Israel so as to know: will they obey God's commands?" (Judg 3:4). When God abandoned Hezekiah to the invading Assyrians, it was "to test him, to know everything in his mind" (2 Chron 32:31). Psalm 139 concludes, "Examine me, God, and know my mind; probe me (*bāhʾan*) and know my concerns. See if there is an idolatrous way in me, and lead me in the ancient way." Psalm 26:2 urges, "probe me, God, test me, try my mind and heart" (lit., "my heart and kidneys"). A number of other passages refer to God's trying the mind and heart, with the implication that God is thereby discovering whether there is an inner attitude of trust in God and commitment to God that corresponds to the outward profession (e.g., Ps 7:9 [10]; 17:3; 26:2; cf. 1 Chron 29:17; Jer 11:20; 12:3; 17:10; 20:12). Other brief references to God's testing (Exod 15:25; 20:20 [17]; Job 23:10; Pss 66:10; 81:7 [8]; 105:19; Prov 17:3; Isa 48:10; Jer 9:7 [6]; Zech 13:9) mostly look at the testing from the angle of the people being tested and focus on its refining affect on them rather than its significance for God's knowledge.

Omniscience

So scripture suggests that God is not omniscient about the past or present any more than about the future, but that God can discover anything God wants to know about past, present, or future.

A prominent open theist, Clark H. Pinnock, declares, "God must know all things that can be known and know them truly."²⁹ Alongside this sentence in our library copy of this book, someone has written, "Very speculative!" It was wicked to write in a library book, but it was a perceptive observation. The declaration about God's omniscience is one that open theism shares with classical theism; to be omniscient is part of what the word "God" means. But this conviction shared by classical theism and open theism is not one derived from scripture or present in scripture.

So where did it come from? When Christian theology differs from scripture, the usual rule is, "When in doubt, blame the Greeks," and open theists do that.³⁰ But where did the Greeks get their views from? Theologically, the answer is that they come from what we might call innate knowledge, or natural revelation, or human culture, or human speculation; I will refer to this simply as natural theology, things about God and us that we know or think we know but that do not come from the Bible. There are many such convictions that come from natural theology, and they can be true; but we bring them to scripture to see how and where scripture confirms or refines them. Commonly scripture does that by drawing our attention to what God did in Israel and in Christ, which provides clues to the nature of God and of everything else that could not emerge from natural theology. These clues reframe the insights of natural theology, often in radical ways

The problem is that natural theology, convictions about God that seem "obviously" true, become embedded in Christian theology. The role that scripture then plays is to provide the justification for the positions of Christian theology, whether these positions were intrinsically scriptural or not. The theologians engaged in this task are people committed to the authority of scripture who reckon that their positions must be compatible with scripture or required by scripture. And, of course, one can prove anything from scripture if one tries hard enough. So the way -isms proceed is by noting scriptural texts that support their position, in order to demonstrate that a position that did not necessarily emerge from scripture is actually scriptural. The rude term for this is "proof-texting," but there is nothing wrong with it in principle. One question is, does the text

²⁹ "Systematic Theology," in Pinnock and others, *The Openness of God*, pp. 101-25 (p. 121).

³⁰ Though classical theists note the problems in this ploy: for instance, which Greeks? See, e.g., Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow?* pp. 195-211.

actually support the position in question? Another question is, what place does it have in scriptural thinking as a whole?

In connection with our present subject, it is striking that when the Old Testament offers descriptions of God (e.g., Exod 15:1-11; 34:6-7), it does not major on God's knowledge, though it does refer to God's wisdom. Similarly, when Paul refers to the innate knowledge of God that everyone has, he speaks of God's power and deity, not specifically of God's knowledge (Rom 1:20). Indeed, it is hard to find scriptural affirmations of divine omniscience; the affirmations that are quoted in connection with the present debate are inclined to dissolve on examination.³¹ First John 3:20 is the nearest to a proof text for divine omniscience; it declares that God "knows everything" and therefore knows our hearts. But a commentator sees the point in this statement as lying in that inference about knowing our hearts: "God... unlike our fallible scruples, knows everything necessary to render a valid judgment." He compares John 21:17, where in a similar context Peter affirms to Jesus, "You know all things."³² It is a telling comparison because this cannot be understood in a hard sense, for even the Son does not know about "that day or hour" (Mark 13:32). Jesus tells us he does not know all things. And it is surely unrealistic to reckon that Jesus already knows the answer to every one of the many questions he asks in the Gospels, even though he, too, is fond of rhetorical questions.

Within the Old Testament, Psalm 139 is especially commonly appealed to as implying divine omniscience, but (even apart from the fact that it speaks only about God's relationship with one individual) it is at best ambiguous in this connection. Many lines acknowledge God's extraordinary knowledge of the suppliant. "Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely" (Ps 139:4 TNIV). But the psalmist's confession is more literally, "There is not a word on my tongue but that You, O LORD, know it well" (NJPS). In other words, God hears every word I say. Further, the psalm's statements about God's knowledge are all set in the context of a significant opening declaration, "You have searched me, LORD, and you know me" (Ps 139:1 TNIV) or "O LORD, you have searched me and known me"

³¹ Psalm 147:5 often appears in lists of significant texts: "Our Lord is great and mighty in power; of his insight there is no reckoning." But this does not imply omniscience. Isaiah 40:13-14 appears in such lists; but it concerns the fact that God knew all about the way to go about creating the world (Paul quotes that passage in Rom 11:33-34 in connection with the way God has been at work in the destiny of Israel and the world). Elihu describes God as "perfect in knowledge" (Job 37:16); the phrase is actually puzzling in the context, but in any case Elihu has made the same claim for himself (Job 36:4), so it does not prove very much. For further passages, see (e.g.) Bruce Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *JETS* 29 (1986): 431-46 (p. 442); Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow?* p. 11.

³² See C. Clifton Black, "The First, Second, and Third Letters of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 12:363-469 (p. 42).

(NRSV). In other words, God indeed has extraordinary knowledge of the psalmist, but has that knowledge as a result of doing research. It is not something that God simply possesses by nature. Once again, God gains knowledge in the same way as anyone does. The difference between God and anyone else is God's monumental research capacity. "You perceive my thoughts from afar" (Ps 139:2 TNIV).³³ Like other Old and New Testament passages already noted, the psalm affirms that God can find anything out, even our inner thoughts, but not that God knows everything without looking.

Speaking in Human Terms

A classical theist declares, "The debate... is not about individual texts but about which texts are to be given hermeneutical priority in formulating a doctrine of God."³⁴ This comment articulates an important principle. A good illustration is passages that speak of God having a change of mind, or not doing that. Classical theism gives priority to passages declaring that God does not have a change of mind, over passages declaring that God does have a change of mind. This works by suggesting that the former are literal statements, the latter are figurative; specifically, they are anthropomorphic. God is described as if God were a human being, and human beings do find things out by discovering them. Further, those statements are phenomenological; God is described in light of the way God's acts are experienced by human beings, and from a human perspective, it seems that God has a change of mind.³⁵

This process of interpretation raises several questions. One is that asserting hermeneutical priority has become a process whereby some texts silence others.³⁶

Second, there is that troublesome fact that, as it is hard to find declarations of God's omniscience but easy to find descriptions of God's discovering things, only two passages declare that God does not

³³ Roy (*How Much Does God Foreknow?* p. 29) infers from v. 16 that "all the days of David's life were ordained by God before any one of them came to be" so that "God knew them all in advance" and "knew David thoroughly and exhaustively before any divine searching took place." But this is to read rather a lot into an enigmatic line, which NJPS translates "my unformed limbs... were all recorded in your book; in due time they were formed."

³⁴ Paul Helm, "An Augustinian-Calvinist Response [to the open theism view]", *Divine Foreknowledge* (ed. Beilby and Eddy) 61-64 (p. 62).

³⁵ See, e.g., Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow?* pp. 159-76.

³⁶ Asserting hermeneutical priority does not need to be that. When Jesus declares the principle that everything in the Torah and the Prophets is an exposition of love of God and love of one's neighbor (Matt 22:40), this can, for instance, help us perceive possibilities and adjudicate conflicts in the interpretation of passages in the Torah and the Prophets, and thus enable them to speak to us. But applied to talk of God's having as opposed to not having a change of mind, or knowing everything as opposed to discovering things, the assertion of hermeneutical priority seems simply to silence the second set of texts. They have nothing to say.

have a change of mind (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29), whereas a score of passages speak of God doing so (e.g., Ex 32:14; 1 Chr 21:15; Jer 18:4-10; 26:2-3, 17-19; Joel 2:12-13; Jonah 3:10; 4:2).³⁷ And one of the passages that speak of God having a change of mind (Jer 18:4-10) is the most systematic discussion of the entire question. Why do the first two passages have the hermeneutical priority?

People appeal to anthropomorphism when statements about God do not fit with what they can believe about God. They make this appeal when scripture describes God as having strong feelings such as jealousy, or as experiencing pain. The definition of God might seem to exclude God's having such feelings or experiences. Once again we can blame the Greeks for this assumption.³⁸ But it is simply an assumption, not an aspect of the way God is described in scripture. It is natural theology that tells us to read scripture this way.

Then (third) it is questionable whether statements about God having a change of mind or discovering things are more anthropomorphic or phenomenological than many other scriptural statements. Nearly all God's actions are described as if God were a human being and in light of the way God's acts are experienced by human beings. Theologically this is not worrisome because human beings are made in God's image, so in principle using human models to understand God is illuminating. We speak of God loving, making decisions, seeing, hearing, showing mercy, acting, and so on; all these are characteristic of human beings, but we can take them as also divine characteristics. While we need to be wary of making God wholly human-like, to say God loves or acts (or discovers things or has a change of mind) is to speak anthropomorphically, in the sense of analogically, but truly.

We also speak of God having eyes, ears, hands, and feet, and we usually assume that this is anthropomorphic in another sense. Whereas reference to God loving or acting is analogical language, reference to God's body parts gives concrete, metaphorical expression to the analogical language. God acts, sees, and hears; it is *as if* God has hands, eyes, and ears. The metaphor serves the literal, and we can then give a less metaphorical account of the subject: for instance, we can speak of God's power instead of God's hand. It is not clear that there is a basis for describing talk of God discovering things or having a change of mind as anthropomorphic in this metaphorical sense, or it is not clear what it is a metaphor for.

Indeed,

³⁷ In addition, on one hand Mal 3:6 simply declares that God does not change (cf. James 1:17), while conversely, many passages in effect describe God having a change of mind without using this verb (e.g., 2 Kings 20:1-6).

³⁸ John Sanders "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock and others, *The Openness of God*, pp. 59-100 (pp. seeks to demonstrate that the appeal to language being merely anthropomorphic and phenomenological come from Greek philosophy via Philo into Clement and Origen).

If ever there was a miserable anthropomorphism, it is the hallucination of a divine immutability which rules out the possibility that God can let Himself be conditioned in this or that way by His creature. God is certainly immutable. But He is immutable as the living God and in the mercy in which He espouses the cause of the creature.... He can give to this creature a place in His will.³⁹

The Zohar notes Solomon's testimony that "not one word has failed of every good word that he spoke by means of his servant Moses" (1 Kings 8:56) and comments that if this said simply that "not one word of every *word*" has failed, as opposed to "not one word of every *good* word," it would have been better if the world had never been created. But fortunately (it goes on), an argument does go on within God.⁴⁰ God's words about calamity do not always come true.

It would be more appropriate to ask what distinctive affirmation each sort of statement is making and to seek to combine these. Of the two declarations that God does not have a change of mind, the context of the first, in Num 23:19, indicates its point, that God will not go back on a commitment to bless Israel. The situation with 1 Sam 15:29 is the more paradoxical, because on either side of this verse the chapter itself declares that God has had a change of mind about making Saul king (1 Sam 15:11, 35).⁴¹ Perhaps the emphasis lies on God's not having a change of mind like a human being; God is not arbitrary in having changes of mind, as human beings can be. Further, Samuel's statement may be concrete not general.⁴² God will not have a change of mind about deposing Saul. There are occasions when God has a change of mind, and there are occasions when God does not. It is quite possible to let all the passages have their say without giving any the hermeneutical priority. Some passages assure us that God is not arbitrary; others assure us that God is not inflexible.

3 Conclusion

To conclude. Scripture implies that God has some innate knowledge and also has access to all knowledge about everything past, present, and future. I infer that God sometimes chooses to

³⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (reprinted Edinburgh: Clark, 1969), p. 109.

⁴⁰ See the selections in *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (New York: Paulist, 1983), p. 137; cf. Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2003), p. 160.

⁴¹ At least, it has made God the subject of the verb *nāh/am* niphal, though some translations vary the way they render the verb.

⁴² As is the case in other passages that refer to God not having a change of mind in a particular concrete connection (e.g., Ps 110:4; Jer 4:28).

exercise that access but sometimes chooses not to do so. One might hypothesize that it is “natural” to God as for us to live in linear time and thus not usually to know the future, and that this makes for more real relations with other beings such as ourselves if God does not continually utilize the capacity to look into our minds or our futures. But this is guesswork, human theorizing, like the human theorizing that underlies both classical theism and open theism.

No doubt we will all be glad that God may often choose not to know what we are thinking. But we would be unwise to make too much of this; we still cannot conceal things from God when God wants to know them. You can run but you cannot hide. We may alternatively be apprehensive about the idea that God does not know how the future will turn out. But this same God is one characterized by infinite self-giving and infinite power. People who want to hide may never experience God like that. People who are afraid that God may get caught out can be sure that God will be up to coping with whatever happens. God has surprises. But God is not afraid of surprises.